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Local News

Sun, February 9, 2003

Coble says remarks were historical fact
He says he didn't mean to offend anyone, and won't quit House post

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

GREENSBORO

U.S. Rep. Howard Coble said he won't apologize for comments last week defending the U.S. government's decision to force Japanese-Americans into internment camps during World War II.

Coble, R-6th, also said he won't resign as chairman of a new House subcommittee with responsibility for homeland security.

"I was just stating historical fact," Coble said Friday. "If those comments were offensive to anyone, I apologize for that. I did not intend to be insensitive or uncaring."

On Tuesday, Coble, on a Greensboro radio call-in show, disagreed with a caller who said that Arab-Americans should be sent to internment camps during the war on terrorism.

He added that the camps served the nation's security needs during World War II because a few Japanese-Americans might have been intent on harming America, "just as some Arab-Americans are probably intent on doing us harm today."

Coble said that it was "a very, very cruel thing to do" to Japanese-Americans, but that he believed that the decision was right for those times.

Besides removing a possible security threat, the government sought to protect Japanese-Americans from harm by other Americans seething about Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, Coble said.

The Japanese American Citizens League and Muslims for a Better North Carolina called on Coble to resign as chairman of a House Judiciary Committee panel overseeing homeland security.

"To suggest that the government locked up 120,000 innocent people for their own protection is not only patronizing and offensive, but it is patently incorrect," Floyd Mori, the head of the Japanese American Citizens League, said in a letter to Coble.

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House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, the highest-ranking Democrat in the House, said that Coble seemed to try to turn "injustice into a virtue." "His remarks demonstrated an appalling disregard for civil liberties and inexcusable ignorance of history," Pelosi, D-Calif., said.

The state Arab-American group's leader, Badi Ali of Greensboro, decried remarks by Coble and Republican Rep. Sue Myrick, who represents the Charlotte area. In remarks last week about domestic security threats, Myrick said, "Look at who runs all the convenience stores across the country."

Ali compared Coble's and Myrick's comments to those made in December by Sen. Trent Lott, R-Miss., who was forced to quit as Senate majority leader after praising retiring Sen. Strom Thurmond's segregationist presidential campaign of 1948.

"Trent Lott's racially charged comments led to a political firestorm against him," Ali said. "But when Coble and Myrick express racial bias and prejudice against Arab-Americans, little more than a rustle of discount is heard. Prejudice against Muslims and Arab-Americans seems to be more readily acceptable in this country."

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